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ABSTRACT

The current trends of today's workplace indicate that effective communication in business is very important. If academics are in sync theoretically and conceptually with the business world, they are not effectively communicating those theories and concepts to students; academics must be stronger in the area of application. A survey was conducted of 1,000 managers/recruiters as well as academicians who teach business and professional communication at colleges and universities; 346 questionnaires were returned. Academics and recruiters generally agreed on the top five characteristics necessary for new hires in getting and keeping a professional job: ability to communicate; ability to get along with people; listening effectively; and teamwork capabilities. Academics included "writing effectively" on their list; recruiters included "time management skills." An examination of texts used in business communication courses shows strong similarities on the level of content. However, professors should go beyond instruction in communication techniques to engage students more deeply in the nature and function of business communication. Five options are suggested: (1) use communication technology in the classroom; (2) use multimedia presentations in the classroom; (3) bring the real business world into the classroom; (4) do exercises using a hypothetical company; (5) perform realistic role-play simulations. (Contains 20 references.) (TB)

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Business And Professional Communication:

Where Are We Now?

Are We Teaching Skills That Are Necessary

In Business Today?

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Paper presented to the 80th Speech Communication Association

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The current trends of today's workplace indicate that effective communication in business is an art. The ability to understand human behavior, to listen and respond to the current--and future--needs of the workforce, and to work well with executive management are required for the current generation of business communicators.

The globalization of the economy, the intensification of competition for emerging markets, increasing diversity in the work force and rapid advances in technology are all factors that have redefined the business world of the 90's. The nature of work and the characteristics of workers is changing drastically.

In our ever-changing, diverse workplace, students and business professionals need to know how to cope with factors affecting their work environment. To be competitive in the job market in the 21st century, students need to learn effective business and professional communication skills. This paper will address three questions: 1) What communication skills are most important for college graduates as they enter workplace 2000, 2) What skills do our college graduates currently lack most, and 3) How can we as academics help students determine the skills that are necessary in getting and keeping a professional job in business and industry today?

The purpose of this paper is to argue that while academics are in sync theoretically and conceptually with the business world, we are not bridging the gap between knowledge and practice for our students. Five options are offered as viable solutions to this problem.

Communication skills are considered essential for the 90's workforce. As educators, we must ask ourselves if we are teaching the skills necessary for graduates to function in today's business world. What students need are communication skills that will carry them into the next century. Communication is vital to the success of the individual and therefore, the success of the organization.

What Employers Want

According to a 1993 national survey conducted by the College Placement Council, which collects and maintains information on trends and projections in career planning and placement, 245 employers responded to the question "what skills are most important for college graduates?" Their overwhelming response was oral communication and interpersonal skills followed by teamwork and analytical abilities. (Collins & Oberman, 1994, p. 58). Since companies are restructuring to compete in the global economy they have limited employment opportunities, so hiring those with the best mix of skills is critical. Overall communication skills topped the list. In another study that was conducted by Fidler and Pritchard (1993) on the topic of what small firms look for in college graduates, survey results showed that managers place a high priority on the qualities of being a team player and possessing interpersonal and oral communication skills. The responses also indicated that managers value a strong inner commitment as well as effective team skills (p. 47).

Evidence of the necessity for communication skills in business is also visible in the popular press. Stephen Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" (1990) addresses universal principles of change in personal habits which affects change in the work environment. His suggestions for problem-solving encompass seven characteristics which include (1) personal vision (2) personal leadership (3) personal management (4) interpersonal leadership (5) empathic communication (6) creative cooperation, and (7) balanced self-renewal. Covey's book is philosophical yet deals with topics discussed in business and professional communication. Green and Seymour (1991) confront the issues of "what college students need to learn today to become business leaders of tomorrow" in their best-selling book, "Who's Going to Run General Motors?" The authors focus on what students need to know to prepare for a changing world. Their approach is strictly from the business aspect. They highlight seven fundamental skills that every college student and future business professional should acquire. These are (1) communication skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening (2) being a team player (3) learning and adapting to new generation of technology (4) ability to identify and solve problems (5) ability to recognize global competition and expanding global markets (6) ability to adapt to change, and (7) leadership capability. All of these topics are related to the business and professional communication course. Green and Seymour indicate that the skills both large corporations and small businesses want do not reside in any single major or professional specialization. U.S. businesses need people with both

practical skills and liberal learning--both depth and breadth (p. 172).

What Skills Students Lack in the Job Market

Communication skills were cited most often as weak points in today's college graduates according to survey results that appeared in the August, 1992 HR Focus (Smith and Thompson). Specifically, the authors referred to both oral and written communication skills, with emphasis on the written skill, i.e., "the ability to write a comprehensive memo" (p. 22). Additional weaknesses cited in the survey included "lack of understanding of how organizations work, poor organizational skills, and an inability to work as a team" (ibid). Results of the survey also indicated that students generally lack maturity and direction in business. The study showed that most of the traditional age college graduates have a need for immediate gratification and expect to be vice president within a short period of time. Therefore, students experience unrealistic expectations when they enter the business world.

Atkins and Kent (1988) conducted an investigation to determine recruiters' attitudes regarding various hiring characteristics and their impact during the campus interview. The results demonstrated that ninety-five recruiters overwhelmingly ranked overall oral communication skills as most important in the hiring process (p. 102). Specifically, the authors cited verbal skills such as poor grammar and articulation as factors contributing to the overall effect on the hiring process. The authors strongly recommended students take courses to develop their

public speaking skills and additional coursework to develop their oral presentation competence, i.e. role playing and mock interviewing in the classroom.

Bridging the Gap in Learning

Theoretic Agreement Between Professionals and Academicians.

Perrigo and Gaut conducted a national survey in 1993 of two groups--human resource professionals/recruiters and academicians who teach business communication courses to determine how well they agree on three major subjects: 1) The communication and management skills that are necessary to get and keep a professional-level job, 2) The communication skills that entry-level new hires lack most often, and 3) How academics can assist students in bridging the gap between business communication skills currently being taught and those that are needed in the workplace.

The surveys were sent to human resource managers/recruiters and academicians who teach business and professional communication at colleges and universities. Of the 1,000 participants surveyed, 346 responded.

Academicians and recruiters generally agreed on the top five characteristics necessary for new hires in getting and keeping a professional-level job; specifically, "ability to communicate," "ability to get along with people," "listening effectively," and "teamwork capabilities." Academicians included "writing effectively" in their top-five list, while human resource professionals included "time management skills" (p. 58). The list of communication skills outlined substantiates the parallelism of topics covered in the business and

professional communication course.

In addition, the Perrigo/Gaut survey revealed parallel responses to the top two ratings of human resource professionals and business communication professors in determining the additional skills employees need to help the company compete in the global marketplace by the year 2000. Both groups believed that ability to use "current communication technologies" and an "understanding of multicultural diversity" are essential competencies as we approach the 21st century. If business and professional communication professors are "in sync" with the current needs of business, our students will be prepared to face the communication challenges of business and industry.

Agreement on What We Are Teaching in the Business and Professional Communication Course.

Business and professional communication represents a hybrid course; a melding of the disciplines of business and communication. In a 1993 survey conducted by Nixon and West of the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the major accrediting agency for business schools in the United States, 79% of business communication courses were taught in the business curriculum and 17% were taught in the communication curriculum. (p. 6) Business disciplines tend to emphasize more technical skills training while communication disciplines focus on communication as an emphasis on the entire organizational system.

Business communication is referred to as an "amalgam of many interests,

ideas, topics, methods, theories, and practices" (Shaw, 1993). Thus, we have differing approaches in our perspectives on the skills and knowledge, classroom strategies, research methods and theoretical underpinnings that are associated with the field. The business and professional communication course concentrates on skills needed to perform well in business while providing communication theory to support the subject matter taught. Textbooks and courses offer similar topics, emphasizing a slightly different approach.

A review of four texts currently used in teaching the business and professional communication course reflect the topics included in the course content. The four texts examined are: Strategic Communication in Business and the Professions (O'Hair and Friedrich, 1992), Communicating in Business and the Professions: The Inside Word (Staley and Staley, 1992), Communicating For Results: A Guide for Business and the Professions, (4th ed.), (Hamilton and Parker, 1993), and Communication at Work: Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions, (3rd ed.), (Adler, 1989). These texts provide comprehensive instruction appropriate for sophomore, junior or senior levels of college. The approach is slightly different in each, but all four texts provide

Some similarities found in all of the texts address such classic topics as:

- the communication process
- organizational theory
- effective listening skills

- verbal and nonverbal communication
- interpersonal relationships
- interviewing techniques
- small group communication
- presentation skills

The four texts reviewed also address some of the more germane contemporary issues in business such as:

- cultural diversity in the workplace
- team-building development
- gender differences in communication
- sexual harassment
- office politics and political correctness
- communication and business ethics
- communication technologies

All of these texts combine a theoretical approach while focusing on practical implementation of business communication strategies.

The strength of all four texts is their content level. The theories and concepts of business and professional communication are explained with a variety of real life examples and applications which are included throughout the chapters. Texts of the 90's must contend with changing trends in the business world and cope with finding contemporary illustrations and relevant exercises to fit the needs of college students.

Bridging the Gap Between Knowledge and Practice

One of the many goals in teaching the business and professional communication course is to instill in students the understanding of the field's theories and applications and that they use this knowledge to apply to their personal and professional lives. The author argues that this is where the gap lies.

Professors should go beyond instruction in communication techniques to engage students more deeply in the nature and function of business and professional communication. We should prepare students for not only entry-level positions in business but also future managerial roles. Five options for preparing students in the classroom for roles in business are suggested.

1) One method to provide a state-of-the-art approach in the classroom is use of communication technology. For example, computer-based simulation exercises provide an opportunity for teamwork and interpersonal skills training. Students need to be cognizant of the technology available through use of computerized equipment in the classroom environment.

2) Another example is the use of multimedia presentations in the classroom. Communication technologies are vehicles that can provide more efficient and cost effective methods that compliment the more traditional methods of teaching. Presentational speaking using up-to-date equipment enhances student's awareness of the capabilities of multimedia.

3) Professors who make an effort to bring the real business world into the classroom make a difference in the student's awareness of business

communication. Many faculty invite guest speakers from corporations to speak on various subjects such as interview techniques and presentation skills. Students also establish employment contacts for future reference when engaging in the job search process.

4) Another technique to enhance student awareness of practical application of concepts is to construct a hypothetical company and have students correspond with the professor, through various communication methods, as though the professor were the CEO of the corporation, i.e. Staley and Staley. This approach simulates diverse examples of written correspondence students will encounter in the business world.

5) By participating in realistic role-playing simulations between supervisors/subordinates and interviewers/interviewees, students will experience first-hand the antithetical approach to actual business situations. The knowledge students gain by assuming the role of supervisor/interviewer creates an enlightened awareness of dilemmas encountered in real life situations.

The curriculum in communication departments should offer courses that will enhance the career employment opportunities for students. The relevancy of the business and professional communication course to fulfill this need is evident. Both the corporate world and academics strongly believe that college graduates need to be better communicators.

Teaching faculty should maintain contact with business and industry representatives to revise the course when necessary. Students should feel a sense

of "connectedness" with the business world while answering thought-provoking questions and evaluating realistic case studies while taking the course.

Business and professional communication faculty must insist that students know how to speak articulately, write grammatically, listen effectively, and understand nonverbal messages at the conclusion of the course. Procedures must be in place to measure these communication skills effectively throughout the course.

Conclusion

Results of numerous surveys and a review of current literature indicates that academicians are in sync with the communication needs of business professionals theoretically and conceptually. Our challenge as academics is to transfer the knowledge of business and professional communication needs to practical application in order for students to bridge the gap between the classroom and the boardroom.

In five short years we will be on the brink of the 21st century and the communication advances will be markedly different from what we know today. While we are faced with a communication world that will be greatly influenced by technology and the globalization of business, we must look at developing new strategies, skills and tools to cope with the future business world. As academics, we must continually redefine and develop the business and professional communication course to reflect the real world and the extent of communication in global business.

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